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Student: **Michael Higley-Vance**

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EL7004-8

Dr. Alexandru Spatariu

The Online Learner

Activity #4: Online Cultural Issues

Comments:

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You nailed down all different types of possible cultural classroom issues! It is a difficult thing to address even or trained educators. Some things are not within our control. However, the ones that are we may not always have awareness of them and own biases. We can train ourselves to observe and address them.

Alex Spatariu 7 content 3 writing 3/3/3014

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Online Cultural Issues

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Online Cultural Issues

The act of learning in a virtual environment does not alleviate the potential cultural or social issues that may exist or develop between learners and instructors (Muilenburg & Berge, 2005; Wright, Dhanarajan, & Reju, 2009; Lu & Chiou, 2010). Within any learning environment, there are variables such as geographic, language, religious beliefs, political stance, socio-economic status, disability, gender, and race, which can come together in different ways to create learning barriers. Every culture is different and these differences can limit a person's academic success online. A person's cultural views and attitudes can influence student learning in a negative way by creating unfair learning conditions. This paper serves to address some of the potential cultural barriers that exist in an online learning environment such as gender issues, geographical concerns, and disability needs.

Cultural Issues Online

Geographical Issues

A primary feature of online learning is the ability for learners, and instructors, to learn anytime and anywhere (Goodfellow, Lea, Gonzalez, & Mason, 2001; Pigliapoca & Bogliolo, 2008). In many cultures online education can be viewed as a cultural threat (Wright, Dhamarajan, & Reju, 2009), leading to a form of academic cultural imperialism. In some cases the educational frameworks by which learners are educated contradict cultural norms (Sinclair, 2009). Finally, the location of some online learners can contribute to feelings of isolation and a lack of community for learning while online (Al-Fahad, 2010; Muilenburg & Berge, 2005; Pigliapoca & Bogliolo, 2008).

Minimizing Geographical Issues

Online course designers or course instructors cannot generally solve technology and connectivity issues however, if a lack of access to computer technology and the Internet are regular characteristics of the learning environment then perhaps a traditional classroom environment may be more appropriate than online learning. Online instructors of diverse learning communities must be open to learner input and encourage respectful discourse within the learning environment (Pigliapoca & Bogliolo, 2008). Instructors have a responsibility to encourage learners to interact with each other and create activities that promote regular interactivities so that a sense of shared learning can be experienced (Ong & Lai, 2004; Palloff & Pratt, 2005; Omar, Kalulu, & Belmasrour, 2011).

Instructors of online learning environments can reduce potential issues with varying means of delivering content from the way activities are presented to providing media features such as video and audio to support learning (Palloff & Pratt, 2005). Additionally, instructors from varied cultures must provide learners with clear policies for online participation and minimize the number of synchronous components of the expected activities. These teaching practices have the additional benefits of reducing feelings of isolation while engendering a sense of community (Abrami, Bernard, Bures, Borokhovski, & Tamim, 2010; Jackson, Jones, & Omar, Kalulu, & Belmasrour, 2011).

Gender Issues

Gender effects learning online because men and women are inherently different; they interact with technology differently and they interact with others differently (Abbiss, 2008; Chu,

2010; Ding, Bosker, & Harskamp, 2011; Gonzalez-Gomez, Guardiola, Rodriguez, & Alonso, 2012; Bao, Xiong, Hu, & Kibelloh, 2013). Technology products such as, computer laptops, gaming units, cameras, and smart phones seem to all be marketed towards men. Additionally, the literature reviewed on the topic included perspectives that indicated male students were more willing than female learners to use and learn with technology (Gonzalez-Gomez, Guardiola, Rodriguez, & Alonso, 2012).

Men and women interact in conventional ways and this is also true while participating in online learning environments (Bao, Xiong, Hu, & Kibelloh, 2013). Men tend to be more assertive and more likely to dominate online discussions while women tend to communicate interpersonally and are more supportive (Palloff & Pratt, 2005). According to Sinclair (2009) women utilize anonymity while online more often than men and he goes on to suggest that masking ones gender encourages learners to contribute more freely. The State University of New York in 1999 conducted a survey of student satisfaction and perceived learning while online. Women indicated in the survey that they participated more online than in a traditional classroom environment, they had the opportunity to learn more, and technical difficulties were less likely to impede their learning (Fredericksen, Pickett, Shea, Pelz, & Swan, 1999). Furthermore, the survey yielded results, which indicated that women were more satisfied with online learning than male learners (Fredericksen et al., 1999). These findings support that with thoughtful consideration of the online design and learning activities, online learning can minimize bias for marginalized groups.

Minimizing Gender Issues

Interactivities should be encouraged among learners (Omar, Kalulu, & Belmasrour, 2011) and instructors because the practice helps minimize potential gender issues affecting the online

learning culture (Ong & Lai, 2004; Palloff & Pratt, 2005). An example of this practice can be observed through collaborative online learning activities and interactivities that promote equity. Instructors who focus on the social aspects of learning by ensuring course standards are communicated clearly, asking for input from nonparticipating learners, including discussion opportunities, and regularly communicating with online learners (Palloff & Pratt, 2005).

Literacy and Disability Issues

The Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 (ADA) was established so that individuals with disabilities would have the opportunity to live and work with the same freedoms as any other person, regardless of disability. Provisions regarding interacting with learners with disabilities have been created to ensure that they have functionally equivalent services as non-disabled learners while learning online. To safeguard these equivalent services instructors and course designers must create a learning experience that accommodates to and includes assistive technology, which is constantly changing to meet the needs of learners with disabilities (Barrett, 2013). According to Barrett (2013) there are a number of factors related to learning online, which must be considered before learners with disabilities enroll in an online course however, for learners with disabilities e-Learning offers more opportunities than ever before.

Online course interactions are primarily designed using a keyboard while being viewed and read using a monitor. Reading and writing are necessary for learning online due to the design and requirements of its learning environment. Haythornthwaite et al. (2007) suggest that the emphasis on reading and writing is the reason that many learners experience greater academic success in online learning environments over traditional ones. A deficiency in reading or writing proficiencies could serve as a serious barrier for learners while attempting to engage in learning online (Muilenburg & Berge, 2005).

Minimizing Literacy and Disability Issues

Nguyen et al. (2013) begins to address learning online for learners with disabilities by identifying the struggles and establishing solutions in a report written using data from junior and community colleges in and around Quebec. The literature reviewed indicated that online schools should identify potential learning, mental, or physical needs before enrolling learners into online course programs. Instructors can also serve to evaluate a learner regarding whether they have sufficient skill to continue, and if not the instructor should recommend resources that will help to address a suspected deficiency (Nguyen et al., 2013). For example, if a student has only basic reading or writing skills it is essential for them to remediate that deficiency before engaging in online learning. Next, instructors should develop online courses with assistive technology and resources as embedded features of the learning activities. This ensures that the needs of all learners, regardless of disability, are being met (Barrett, 2013). Lastly, it is important for instructors to build trusting relationships with learners with disabilities in order to help bridge the learning gap, however some instructors state they do not have time to establish these relationships even when they can see there is a benefit to the teaching and learning process (Barrett, 2013).

Conclusion

Despite the issues discussed in this paper the gap between online learning and cultural differences are shrinking. Online learning provides an environment whereby geographical, gender, and disability issues can be minimized or overcome. As instructional designs are developed and considered, the needs of a much wider learning community are embedded to meet

and support these issues. Because of this online learning environments are becoming a more equitable space to learn providing the challenges and benefits learners seek of higher educational institutions. Instructor engagement with diversity, active seeking to understand the differences in cultures and learning, identifying early the learning needs of potential learners, and providing supportive interactivities that will help minimize cultural bias are all important considerations for learners and instructors in online learning environments. With these four key components in mind, online educational institutions can form teaching communities that strive to overcome diversity so that learners can begin to share commonalities and differences while learning together in online learning environments. Institutions should address online programs from a learner or group needs perspective when looking at creating or improving diverse online learning communities. Finally, institutions should reflect on their online programs often and accept regular opportunities for input and feedback in order to make adjustments with learning curriculum and environments, which will continue to improve online learning for all groups of people and cultures.

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